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SUBJECT: INDIAN HIGH COMMISSIONER OUTLINES GREATER ENGAGEMENT IN AFRICA

REF: A. Maseru 182 B. Pretoria 1148

¶1. On June 11, 2009, Ambassador Nolan hosted Indian High Commissioner Rajiv Bhatia for a wide-ranging conversation that covered South Africa, Lesotho, and India's increasing engagement with African countries. The High Commissioner is based in Pretoria and accredited to Lesotho; he was in Maseru on an outreach visit, which he schedules approximately every six months. Bhatia estimates that although there are around 4,000-5,000 individuals of Indian descent scattered around Lesotho, only about 1,500 are citizens of India.

¶2. India's only formal presence in Lesotho is made up of eight members of the Indian army who are detailed to the Lesotho Defense Force (LDF) in a training capacity. The High Commissioner was therefore eager to get the Ambassador's take on the recent assassination attempt of the Prime Minister. Bhatia stated that the LDF presented a fairly rosy picture of being in control and investigating the attack to the Indian army representatives, but he wasn't confident that the Indians were getting the full picture. He did note that the LDF troops who responded to the attack at the Prime Minister's residence had been trained by the Indians, stating that the training may have helped the LDF to respond effectively and repel the attackers. Bhatia was interested to hear post's current assessment of the status of the GOL's investigation into the attempted assassination (ref A).

¶3. Bhatia discussed the GOI's growing engagement throughout Africa. He stated that India had increased its presence and outreach to the various bodies of the African Union and is centering its continent-wide engagement with that organization. He also mentioned that the GOI is considering sponsoring a small-scale volunteer program to encourage India's youth to reach out on an individual level across Africa. Lesotho is being considered as a pilot site for such a program, which might include volunteers working in information technology and other technical fields. Ambassador Nolan recommended that Bhatia speak with the local Peace Corps Country Director about the particular challenges of running a volunteer program here.

¶4. As part of the overview of regional issues, Bhatia and the Ambassador discussed the recent decision of Lesotho to sign an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the EU, in spite of restrictions in the SACU treaty against such external agreements (ref B). Bhatia indicated that the South Africans were quite vocal in their discontent with the EPA and that many were advocating for the end of SACU as a result. However, economic analysts in Pretoria seemed to think that the flurry of interest and concern would be short-lived, and SACU would continue to

exist in its present form. Ambassador Nolan pointed out that the GOL receives 60% of its revenue from SACU distributions, and any change to the current revenue-sharing agreement would likely be disastrous to this small country. He also noted that he has heard Maseru's resident South African High Commissioner refer to SACU as a recognized form of development assistance to its smaller and less wealthy neighbors; this attitude, if shared widely among South African government leaders, would make it less likely that South Africa would seek to change the custom union's format.

15. High Commissioner Bhatia plans to return to Maseru at least every six months and he will continue to touch base with Embassy Maseru on a variety of political and economic issues.

NOLAN